

How to Forgive: Ten Guidelines

By Victor M. Parachin *

As poet Edwin Markham approached his retirement years, he discovered that the man to whom he had entrusted his financial portfolio had squandered all the money. Markham's dream of a comfortable retirement vanished. He began to brood over the injustice and the loss. His anger deepened. Over time, Markham's bitterness grew by leaps and bounds. One day while sitting at his table, Markham found himself drawing circles as he tried to soothe the turmoil he felt within. Finally, he concluded: "I must forgive him, and I will forgive him." Looking again at the circles he had drawn on the paper before him, Markham wrote these lines:

*He drew a circle to shut me out, Heretic, rebel,
a thing to flout;*

*But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle to take him in.*

Although Markham wrote hundreds of poems contained in many book volumes, the words he wrote while forgiving are his most popular and memorable. As he forgave, a tremendous act of creativity was released within Markham. The poets and mystics among us have long known and declared that the act of forgiveness releases great healing power.

Author and Minister Charles Fillmore recommended forgiveness as the most effective way of restoring inner harmony and balance: "There is a mental treatment guaranteed to cure

every ill that flesh is heir to: Sit for half an hour every night and forgive everyone against whom you have any ill will or antipathy," he wrote.

While forgiveness has always been an important concept in religion and ethics, only recently have psychologists begun to discover its powers as a psychotherapeutic tool. In three separate studies, people who had not resolved the wrongs done to them (college students, elderly women, and incest survivors) all improved when therapists helped them learn to forgive. Although an increasing number of counselors recommend that we forgive those who have hurt us, many people find forgiveness difficult to offer. Here are ten guidelines to help extend forgiveness and ease resentment.

Educate Yourself about Forgiveness

"Forgive," according to Webster's New World Dictionary, means: "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; pardon; to overlook an offense; to cancel a debt." Thus, the goal of forgiveness is to let go of a hurt and move ahead with life. Visit a library and research books or magazine articles on forgiveness so that you understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy forgiveness. For example, Robert Enright, Ph.D., an education psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, stresses that true forgiveness is not:

Forgetting. If the hurt wounded you enough to require forgiveness, you may always have a memory of it.

Excusing or condoning. The wrong should not be denied, minimized, or justified.

Reconciling. You can forgive the offender and still choose not to reestablish the relationship.

Weakness. You do not become a doormat or oblivious to cruelty.

Spend a Few Minutes Each Day Cleaning Your Thinking

At a local florist shop, I once watched the owner remove tiny bugs from a potted plant. Using a cotton swab he meticulously plucked off one small tenaciously clinging offender after another. Although that tedious process took him several hours of silent concentration and steady work, he was able to rid the plant of what would ultimately stunt its growth and ruin its loveliness. There is a lesson from that florist which applies to daily living. The only way to keep ourselves free from the infestation of troublesome thoughts is to spend a few minutes each day cleaning out our thinking.

Has someone hurt you by his or her comments? Were you publicly insulted by someone? Did a friend fail to come through for you? Pluck off each offending layer of thought and dispose of it just as the florist disposed of the tiny insects destroying his lovely plant. Doing so insures that a vague irritation does not transform itself into a deep resentment and an intense hatred.

Practice on Small Hurts

To become a generous forgiver of major pains, practice forgiveness on small hurts. Forgive immediately the small slights inflicted by strangers – a rude clerk, a driver who cut you off, a doctor who keeps you waiting and waiting, etc. Use those events as practice time to prepare you for the tougher task of forgiving major hurts.

Challenge the "Shoulds" in Your Thinking

Forgiveness is much easier when you give up the irrational belief that fuels your frustration, anger, and hostility – the expectation that other people will always act in the way you want. Beware of the "shoulds" in your thinking and speaking:

He shouldn't have done this to me.

She shouldn't act that way.

My daughter should have known better.

My son should be more attentive to me.

I've worked hard and I should have been rewarded.

Whenever you find the word "should" in your mind and talk, challenge yourself. Tell yourself it is unrealistic to expect that people will always act decently and respectfully toward you. Remind yourself that everyone is fallible and capable of making a mistake.

Understand That Resentment has a High Price Tag

"Holding a grudge takes mental, emotional, and physical energy. It makes you obsessive, angry, and depressed," observes Barry Lubetkin, a psychologist and director of the Institute for Behavior Therapy in New York City. "There's a strong connection between anger and a wide spectrum of health miseries – chronic stomach upset, heart problems, and skin conditions among them. Without question, the more anger we experience within, the more stress we're under," he adds. Whenever a hostile or hateful thought enters your mind, try to be fully aware of the harm that resentment can do to you, even making you ill. Let that knowledge further motivate you to forgive and let go.

Remember: Lack of Forgiveness is Giving Others Power over You.

Withholding forgiveness and nursing resentment simply allow another person to have control over your well-being. It is always a mistake to let such negative emotions influence your living. Forgive, and you will be able to direct your life in positive thoughts and actions. An excellent example is that of educator Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). An emancipated slave who started out living in abject poverty; he had to work from the age of nine to help support his family. Instead of becoming bitter about the hardships he faced and viewing himself as a victim, Washington worked hard to improve his situation. He first became a janitor in a school to obtain his education. Then he went on to teach at Hampton Institute, one of the first African-American colleges in the U.S. Later he organized and became president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. "I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him," was Washington's lifelong motto.

Recognize the Ripple Effect of Harboring a Grudge

When you can't forgive someone, there can be a ripple effect which negatively infects your family and friends. Writing to advice columnist "Dear Abby," a woman says: "I have something to say to the millions of families whose lives are affected by divorce. An unforgiving and bitter person who has not let go of animosities can poison an entire family and ruin the holidays for everyone. I know. I was that person." The writer, who signs herself as "Free in Vermont," explains she could not forgive her former husband and his new wife, and her children suffered her ensuing bitterness. "One day after a particularly harsh outburst, I understood the pained reaction on my children's faces. I prayed for the strength to change my ways so that I could stop hurting those I love most in the world." Although it was difficult for "Free in

Vermont" to extend forgiveness, she did so and says:

"I have peace in my heart and my children are happy. They are free to enjoy both homes." Forgiveness is a priceless gift which you can give to yourself and your family.

Bury the Grudge – Literally

Write a letter to the person who hurt you but don't mail it. Express fully, clearly, honestly, how you feel and why that person's act hurt you and made you angry. Conclude with the bold declaration that you have forgiven him or her. Then, bury the letter in a potted plant or somewhere in your yard. This is a powerful symbolic exercise that many people have found to be extremely therapeutic.

Try Instant Forgiveness

Lewis Smedes, a professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, and author of Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve, tells of his rage toward a police officer who brutalized his young son, John. The officer was a large 250-pound lawman who assaulted his 140-pound son and then charged him with resisting an officer. Although the charge was quickly dismissed, Smedes's rage and hostility were not so quickly appeased. Realizing that his intense feelings toward the police officer were creating a personal emotional crisis, Smedes knew he had to find a way of forgiving.

"I tried a technique that everything in my temperament resisted," he writes. "I thought about how a priest gives instant absolution to a penitent, right off the bat, in the confessional booth. And I decided to give this cop absolution. 'In the name of God I hereby forgive you—go in peace,' I said out loud, at least six times. It worked enough to get me going. I felt myself pried a couple of inches off my hate. And I was on my way."

Recall Repeatedly This One Vital Fact

Forgiveness is a Gift You Give Yourself

A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who shared the ordeal with him.

"Have you forgiven the Nazis?" he asked his friend.

"Yes."

"Well, I haven't. I'm still consumed with hatred for them," the other man declared.

"In that case," said his friend gently, "they still have you in prison."

That story points out this reality: ultimately, forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. Bitterness and anger imprison you emotionally. Forgiveness sets you free.

*About this article. We first encountered Victor's fine guidance in Venture Inward, May/June 1999, the Magazine of the Association for Research and Enlightenment of the Edgar Cayce Foundation. Victor Parachin, an ordained

minister and writer living in Claremont, California, is the author of 365 Good Reasons to Be a Vegetarian.

On May 20th, 1999 we asked Victor if we might post his wisdom here. He was kind enough to permit his words to be posted because he hoped that they might be of help to additional people. Victor, your practical guidance is just what we need!

We have no knowledge of the extent to which Victor is familiar with AA. Because he is a minister, though, we assume he has seen families ravaged by alcoholism. His words have the same truth and practicality we have heard in our Big Book and meetings. AA is blessed with its wonderful friends, even when they might be so only in spirit.

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